



**Tormented Hope:
Nine Hypochondriac
Lives**, by Brian Dillon
(Penguin, £8.99)

Brian Dillon's elegant and at times poignant study of nine hypochondriacs, including James Boswell, Charlotte Brontë and Glenn Gould, reveals the hopes and fears that we all feel about our bodies. For behind the condition more properly known as "health anxiety" lies a question of abiding and general importance: how can we reflect on our mortality without being consumed by the fear that paralyses the hypochondriac? Dillon's "biography of bodies" is dominated by writers and artists, such as the asthmatic Proust, who lived in "fragile seclusion" from the world, writing his magnum opus in his bed within a cork-lined room, and Andy Warhol, tormented by both physical beauty and the threat of illness. Here also is Darwin, whose "diary of health" was a meticulous record of flatulence and other symptoms. There is humour in such obsession, memorably expressed in Spike Milligan's epitaph: "I told you I was ill." But, as Dillon says, in the end "hypochondria makes dupes of us all, because life, or rather death, will have the last laugh".

PD Smith